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## Chapter 1

# Engendering the Postmodern Canon?

*The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing,  
Volumes IV & V: Women's Writing and Traditions*

Gerardine Meaney

'Is tradition like history? Do we have to invent it?'  
Eilís Ní Dhuibhne, 'The Flowering'

'Tradition is . . . not merely what the past leaves us. It must always be understood as selective tradition . . . Tradition cultivates its own inevitability by erasing the fact of its selectivity in regard to practices, meanings, gender, "races" and classes'.  
Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon* (p. 10)

### **The context of the anthology**

The final two volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* have their origins in the controversy surrounding the first three volumes, sharply criticized for their under-representation of women's writing. That controversy focused very much on contemporary writing and the virtual invisibility of the women's movement. The two new volumes are, however, much broader than this in their historical, disciplinary and thematic range. The editorial structure and the methodologies employed were also very different from those of the previous volumes. Three literary critics, three historians and two Irish language editors formed a multidisciplinary and collaborative panel which identified areas for inclusion and commissioned a total of forty-seven other contributing editors, from a wide variety of academic disciplines, journalism, the arts and political groups, to research, identify and edit material for inclusion. The result was the identification of a more complex and diverse range of sources than even that editorial panel had ever envisaged. The enormous number of texts from which the selections had to be made led to the eventual conclusion that the one volume originally planned simply could not

do justice to the material. The editorial staff of Cork University Press, who took over as publishers of the project in 1999, arrived at the pragmatic solution of a two-volume set.

Each of the panel editors assumed responsibility for an individual section, early in the commissioning process. My own section was 'Women and Writing, 1700–1960', and it is on the editing of that section, and the issues of selection, research methodology and critical practice which I had to resolve in the process, that I wish to focus here. The eight-member editorial panel was crucial, however, in creating a context where critical and historical certainties were challenged and reshaped. The sections are discrete, but the editorial process was one of creative fusion. One aspect of the volumes which gives me as an editor particular satisfaction at this stage is the juxtaposition within them of poetry, fiction and drama with women's stories from workhouses, convents and prisons and the intermingling of both with the legacy of storytellers, singers and keeners. The very diverse and complex picture of women's history and creative output which results is the outcome of the collaborative and multidisciplinary nature of the project.

My own editorial activity was concentrated in the traditional literary genres, however, and as such my section bears a closer relationship to the first three volumes than do those dealing with oral or historical material. Consequently, the issue of literary canons, their formation and change, was an important one for me from the start. I have kept a shortlist of items which I was originally dismayed to discover were not in the first three volumes as a reminder of how far we have travelled: it was only two pages long. Editing this anthology was a voyage of discovery for me as editor, primarily into the extraordinary wealth of material written by women between 1890 and 1960, which I edited in detail, but also vicariously through the work of contributing editors and my colleagues on the editorial panel.

It became clear after the first year or two of reading and research that the material we were dealing with did not fit easily into any of the existing paradigms for Irish literary history. It also became clear to me, working in the areas closest to those in which the then-prevailing ways of constructing the history of women's writing in the English language had been established, that those paradigms too were challenged by the material. There is no strong tradition of realist domestic fiction, for example, and only limited examples of the female Bildungsroman. In contrast, there are numerous examples of women writing political poetry, drama and fiction, particularly historical fiction, which constituted an important, if often overlooked, intervention into the 'mainstream' discourses of nationalist and unionist politics. In the twentieth century, popular dialect poetry is as strong a current as strenuous modernist experiment with form. Consequently, part of the project for me was to generate new critical paradigms as well as recover lost texts.

### Feminist theory, literary history and editorial practice: critical and academic contexts

Typically for an Irish feminist critic, my involvement in feminist criticism was initially an entirely separate development to my education in Irish literature. The origins of both lie in teenage reading. I read a copy of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) discovered in a house where I was babysitting: the impact on a fifteen-year-old attending a convent secondary school in 1970s Kilkenny is difficult even for me to imagine a quarter century later. At university, Greer seemed to lead inexorably to Sylvia Plath, Stevie Smith, Doris Lessing and Angela Carter, and, more convolutedly, to Spark, Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous. Then a friend who was studying French hurried up to me in the library with a copy of Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1972), and the possibility of a completely new way of reading opened up. Inevitably my interests led from Barthes to Elaine Marks and Isabel de Courtivrons's ground-breaking *New French Feminisms* (1981). Translations of the key texts of French feminist theory circulated in University College Dublin in the early 1980s in a kind of samizdat form, blurred photocopies of photocopies of photocopies, all originating from Ailbhe Smyth's seminars on women's writing in the French department. By contrast with deconstructing the entire western tradition in philosophy and literature, the content of most of my Irish literature courses seemed unexciting. Jennifer Johnston was the only Irish woman writer I can recall appearing on the university English curriculum, and the impact of *Shadows on Our Skin* (1977) was a profound one at the time. The consensus was nonetheless that there was no tradition of women's writing in Ireland. Instead there were Joyce and Yeats, lots of them. Courses called 'Poetry after Yeats' re-enforced the idea that Irish writing was basically a great plain with those two monumental peaks (and a cliff face called Beckett). Despite the encomiums of Kristeva and Cixous for Joyce, that landscape felt both alien and hostile. In retrospect, it was, of course, the way in which they were read and taught in the early 1980s that produced this effect, which does not entirely invalidate the perception I shared with many of the female students at the time that Irish literature was the exclusive property of the intense young men in our tutorials who so obviously and painfully identified with Stephen Dedalus. It was that conjunction of French feminism and contemporary English literature that inspired my postgraduate work. Consequently, when I decided to attempt an academic career it was to pursue feminist theory and women's writing, not Irish literature.<sup>1</sup> Again like many of my contemporaries, it was reading feminist criticism which forced me eventually to ask myself where the Irish women writers were buried.

The extraordinary facilitating force of literary theory in the 1980s is often overlooked in criticism of its alleged elitism. At the time, the vast majority of undergraduate English literature students were women. The ratio was dramatically reversed at postgraduate level and the presence of women

decreased even further among lecturing staff. (This gender bias has, of course, changed its structure but emphatically not gone away.) In 1983, I was one of three women in an M.A. class of sixteen, in a department where only two of the twenty lecturers were women. In that context, theories which challenged the cultural authority of the entire edifice were a practical necessity. They cleared a space for different voices to speak and provided a vocabulary which women could use to speak differently and to challenge the certainties which defined literature. Postmodern suspicion of the grand narratives is a natural position for those whose cultural existence the grand narratives deny. Theory gave a powerful language to those previously outside the parameters of cultural power. In effect, feminist literary theory made it possible to function within and against the academic structure. The development of new ways of reading Irish literature within the context of postcolonial theory evolved in the same period: the *Crane Bag* journal (1977–85) and the Field Day pamphlet series transfigured the critical reading of Irish literature in the 1980s. Sustained rereading of the literary revival's construction of Irish literature in English, from Seamus Deane's *Celtic Revivals* in 1985 to Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland* in 1995, reconfigured the canonical terrain. These developments eventually facilitated an exploration of gender, though postcolonial and feminist criticism remained parallel with little integration until the end of the twentieth century.

### **Feminist theory, literary history and editorial practice: political and historical contexts**

The 1980s were also a time of extraordinary social and political turmoil in Ireland, with the successive abortion referenda putting the issue of changing sexual and gender roles at the centre of political life in the South. Anyone politically opposed to the resurgence of the Catholic right at the time was forced to think about the reserves of cultural hysteria centering on women's bodies in general and motherhood in particular which it was able to mobilize. Kristeva's work on the cult of motherhood in Catholic ideology seemed extraordinarily resonant to me and it gave me a way of analysing underlying cultural and symbolic structures which could account for the origins of the ferocity of the social and cultural conflict of the period.<sup>2</sup> It was an attempt to use feminist theory to understand the sexual politics of contemporary Ireland which initially led me to work on Irish women's writing. I started working on Kate O'Brien, whom Arlen House and Virago brought back to print and critical notice at the time.<sup>3</sup> Working on O'Brien's novels forced me to adapt Kristeva's theory, paying more attention to the particularities of Irish history. In turn that led to a more historicized approach to theory. In effect, O'Brien conditioned the methodology which would inform my selections in the anthology, certainly for the first half of the twentieth century, not least because initial research into women's fiction in the period indicated a very different context in which her

writing could be regarded as part of a continuum rather than a controversial exception to the development of the Irish novel.

### Women's writing and the canon of Irish literature

The twenty years preceding the inception of Volumes IV and V of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* had been extraordinarily productive for Irish women, with social change and the women's movement generating vibrant and challenging work in all cultural forms and academic disciplines. Anthologies and journal special issues focusing on contemporary Irish women's writing appeared. Major work by Eavan Boland, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Medbh McGuckian, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and later Paula Meehan challenged the masculine construction of the Irish poetic tradition.<sup>4</sup> The new cultural confidence was haunted by a significant absence, however. This is evident particularly in the work of artists and writers. Eavan Boland has spoken repeatedly of the isolation of the woman poet, with no sense of a tradition of writing by women. Medbh McGuckian's 'The Aisling Hat' in *Captain Lavender* (1994) expressed a similar longing: 'I search for a lost, unknown song / in a street as long as a night, / stamped with my own surname' (p. 44). This sense of absence was not entirely due to an absence of awareness of Irish women's past or their cultural contribution. Most of the groundwork for Volumes IV and V, for example, was laid prior to the 1990s. It was for precisely this reason that the 1991 version of the anthology could be challenged. The re-evaluation and recovery of women's work and history was not, however, regarded as part of the serious and central work of defining and redefining Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s. The contested nature of national and political identity in the period often produced self-enclosed binary oppositions, closed to the questioning of national identities, literary canons and historical priorities which an analysis of the role of gender in their construction would have necessitated.

Given that the focus of the section I edited was on traditionally literary forms, the question of how the formation of the literary canon was gendered in Ireland was a crucial one from the start. Even more important was the question of how to postulate an other, differencing literary history which would disrupt existing discourses. Before I became involved in the anthology I had developed an interest in Sandra Harding's feminist epistemology. In the somewhat polarized debate about the relationship between feminism and postmodernism, Harding's work seemed to offer a third way. As I worked on the project, I watched the evolution of her work, moving from a refusal of the 'either/or' polarities of the feminism versus postmodernism debate to a new understanding that combined suspicion of the 'grand narratives' with an acknowledgement of the need to produce new narratives, particularly for those whose narratives have been foreclosed or occluded by the dominant discourse. This seemed to me to be very close to the dilemma facing an editor and anthologist of women's writing. The very existence of Volumes IV and V

challenges the idea that anthologies can ever be more than provisional versions, selections on the basis of criteria that produce and are produced by the values, debates and politics of the culture in and for which they are composed. Their existence also, however, challenges the idea that the absence of claims to totality justifies exclusions of particular groups or points of view. The volumes insist on differences, but it is predicated on sexual difference. The editors had a common desire to undermine the generalization of all Irish women into one type, one history, one 'figure', to recover their differences. To undertake such work is, nonetheless, to propose a provisional narrative of women's relation to writing, to culture and to Ireland. However much it insists on its provisionality, it too will be seen as producing a canon which in turn will be challenged by the work of the next decades in this area.

Here I found Harding's work on standpoint theory particularly useful. Just as the editing of *Field Day* appeared to be ending in 1998 (a false dawn, but it felt like an ending at the time), Harding's *Is Science Multicultural? Post-colonialisms, Feminisms and Epistemologies* appeared. In it she proposed a way of formulating and proposing knowledge that mediated between the claims of truth and relativism in a radical way. The basis of knowledge in this formulation is not a claim to totality or truth but the opening up of new conceptual spaces and dialogue, using a series of strategic maps which make visible the perspective and standpoint from which they are constructed. It is precisely such a strategic map which is provided in the women's writing section of the anthology.

The other important influence on the way I approached the issue of canon formation was Griselda Pollock's work on canons in art history, *Differencing the Canon* (1999). Pollock helped me to bridge the initial gap between my own training in feminist theory and the apparently empiricist requirements of research in bibliography and biography required by the project of retrieving little-known texts. Pollock's aim of 'differencing the canon' particularly appealed to me as it addressed directly the reservation I shared with many critics of the project, that women's writing would be segregated into an 'annex', while the main structure of the Irish literary canon remained untouched. In this context, I held throughout to the decision not to include again women writers already well represented in the first three volumes unless there were very specific and pertinent reasons for doing so. Including again all women writers previously represented would have consolidated a separate canon of women's writing, neatly divided from a male canon which would then assume an originary status as *the* (national) canon. Hence writers from Morgan and Edgeworth to Boland and O'Brien were included again in Volumes IV and V, but thematically, not as the canonical monuments around which the less familiar work could be organized and recuperated into a recognizable version of Irish literary history. To difference the canon, one must combine rereading the known with rendering visible the unknown. Feminist rereading of canonical texts has been an ongoing critical project for several decades. Recovery of the lesser-known

work by women was urgently overdue when we began work at the beginning of the 1990s. There were important predecessors, including Janet Madden-Simpson's *Women's Part* (1984) and A.A. Kelly's *Pillars of the House* (1987). In the intervening years, studies of nineteenth- and eighteenth-century literature, increased interdisciplinarity and focus on previously less-regarded genres, such as Gothic and melodrama, have rapidly expanded the definitions of what constitutes Irish literature. Indeed, some of the contributing editors to the anthology had been pioneers of that expansion. The authors included in the anthology for the period prior to 1960 remain little read beyond academic circles, however. The anthology offered an opportunity to make a much wider public aware of their work and, consequently, of a very different Irish writing beyond the canonical horizon. The Irish media response to the volumes has been disappointing in this regard, proving largely unwilling to look beyond writers and issues with which reviewers are familiar. The question of how successful we have been in the objective of making Irish writing strange to itself awaits a much longer-term response.

As an editor, I took responsibility for representing women's contribution to fairly traditional genres; poetry, fiction, drama, criticism and the writing of history, in the period 1700–1960. In doing so, I chose to work within the traditional parameters of the literary, though the volumes' larger structure meant that the literary was not the dominant variety of writing included but one among many forms of expression. Unlike previously non-canonical written forms, such as diaries and letters, these traditional genres demanded a high degree of self-consciousness about the form and content of their expression by the women who worked within them. For the period 1890 to 1960, on which I worked as a contributing editor as well as general editor, this usually also involved a high degree of self-consciousness about issues of national identity and often included questioning the ways in which national identity was gendered in Ireland. I would like to focus on this period and on this section of the anthology in order to look at the issues of aesthetics and politics, nation and gender, feminism and nationalism from a different angle, one provided by the texts themselves. I also want to deal with the issue of literary merit and its relationship with canon construction, with an emphasis on the way in which the critical concerns I have just outlined informed the choice of texts selected. The best way to address this seems to me to focus on the figure of the woman artist in two little-known poems from the period. The figure of the modern woman artist is an important one in fiction of the period, featuring centrally in Katherine Cecil Thurston's *Max* (1910), for example, and Rosamond Jacob's *The Troubled House* (1938). The woman as storyteller and keeper of the records of oral culture figures in Lady Gregory's *The Gaol Gate* (original performance 1906), where, as I have argued elsewhere, the lamenting or keening woman is a surrogate of the dramatist herself. The woman with the frustrated capabilities of an artist features also in Teresa Deevy's play, *The King of Spain's Daughter* (original performance 1939), a devastating retelling of John



Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (original performance 1907). It is on poetry rather than fiction or drama that I wish to concentrate, however, on one comic and one tragic figure of the woman artist.

### The woman artist: 'Fiddlin' Kate' and modernist Liadain

The section on 'Identity and Opposition, 1890–1960' included poetry, fiction and drama. The section is organized around the thematic and political concerns which these genres shared in the period. Predictably these include matters of gender and national identity, but, more unexpectedly, exploration of the figure of the woman artist is almost equally pervasive. This may have its origins in the suffrage period and the literature of the 'New Woman', but is also attributable to the influence of modernism, particularly its tendency towards self-reflexivity in art. The self-reflexive woman artist in the Irish literature of this period, however, is not exclusive to literature which is stylistically modernist. A very populist and vernacular example is Elizabeth Shane (pseudonym of Gertrude Hine), 'Fiddlin' Kate'. 'Fiddlin' Kate' was originally included in A.A. Kelly's *Pillars of the House* and its inclusion in Volume V of the anthology (p. 1024) registers the debt of anyone working on Irish women's poetry to pioneers like Kelly and Anne Ulry Colman. It is also one of a number of poems representing the tendency towards vernacular and dialect verse by twentieth-century women writers, which appears to have been a predominantly Northern Irish phenomenon. Kate, the poem tells us, 'was a quare wee restless thing, / Her laugh was as gay as a bird in spring, / Her eyes were black wi' a dancin' light, / An' she played the fiddle from morn till night'. Both Kate's personality and her art are clearly at odds with her society's definition of appropriate feminine behaviour. Her lover, Mike, 'wanted a wife could bake an' spin / An' he'd no great notion o' fiddling', concluding "I will not marry a fiddlin' wife. So 'tis the way when ye marry me / Ye'll have the fiddle behind," said he'. Kate successfully defies this disapproval:

She laughed, an' wi' never a word at all  
She turned where the fiddle was on the wall,  
An' tuckin' it under her tilted chin  
Tunes by the dozen did she begin,  
Till Mike, wi' his heart in a black despair,  
Went out o' the door an' left her there.

Kate later encounters him in an argument with his wife, a fine, domesticated, bad-tempered woman. Kate:

. . . looked at him wi' her impish grin –  
'I hope,' said she, 'she can bake an' spin.'  
'Och, och!' said he, 'If I'd known at first,  
Sure a fiddle itself is not the worst.'

Shane's popular comic verse reflects a highly self-confident self-reflexive strain: she herself was a classical violinist. In the poem, the woman artist is exuberantly free not just to reject the constraints of domesticity, but to fully enjoy her 'tunes by the dozen'. This laughing figure is in contrast to the tortured modernist Liadain, who features in Katherine Arnold Price's 'Curithir and Liadain – II' (*Field Day*, vol. V, p. 1026). Price's poem was a major discovery for me, not just because it crystallized many of the central concerns of the section, but also because it raised the issues of literary merit, aesthetic judgement and canonicity in an acute form.

With regard to poetry, the editorial panel had long discussions about the inclusion of poets who had never had a volume of poetry published in book form. Initially we made a general editorial decision that only poets with at least one volume published could be considered or the project would expand in scale to completely unmanageable proportions: none of the editors had teams of researchers at their disposal, which such an undertaking would have required. However, working through journals such as *The Dubliner*, *The Bell* and *Poetry Ireland*, the issue of who had access to publication seemed to me highly significant. In general, women working in popular verse, like Shane/Hine had a much better chance of publication, at least in the first half of the twentieth century. There were poets, such as Blanaid Salkeld and Temple Lane, who were no longer even footnotes to Irish literary history, despite the publication of several volumes of poetry. Salkeld, for example, had a high degree of access to publication and a generally positive critical reception but underwent that peculiar fading from the literary record which feminist criticism in the 1970s and 1980s had chronicled so well in other contexts. Then there were the women who wrote, sometimes all their lives, sometimes in a brief flowering, for the many literary journals and periodicals of Ireland, but who never published a volume. Despite the pragmatic principle of excluding this ocean of material from consideration, I was loath to leave Price out. She had, of course, published two books towards the end of her life when she turned predominantly to fiction (in 1980 and 1985), but that simply confirmed the hypothesis that women had greater access to publication and critical regard in fiction than poetry. Including her fiction rather than her poetry would have been to reproduce that bias. Finally, there was the issue of literary value. It is very difficult to estimate what the influence or otherwise may have been of a poet whose poems appeared in a medium as ephemeral as journals and magazines and whose work, the poems based on the story of Liadain, seem never to have been published in their entirety. It is impossible to postulate even a coherent corpus of her own work, let alone position her within a coherent narrative of Irish poetry or women's poetry. Price's work, however, can work for a contemporary reader if it is situated at the intersection of the discourses of feminism, modernism and nationality. In other words, I thought it would work in the context of this section of the anthology. I wanted it to work, of course, because it seemed to me to have a

force and a quality which not only entitled it to set aside pragmatic editorial decisions but which also called into question in a fundamental way the judgements of posterity. Was I then to have recourse to the notion of the neglected genius and set about seeking canonical status for work which had been too advanced for the literary establishment of the time? Price's poem invites this construction, almost demands it:

... breath, the poet's instrument, must utter  
 Sounds of authority answering the spirit's will,  
 Not testament, nor apologia, nor lament,  
 But the articulation of this consciousness,  
 This way of being that is mine and me.

Liadain's dilemma is whether to integrate life and art, as Cuirithir exhorts her, or to pursue an art which is pure and fatal: 'I wanted to move always further into pure being / Death, or perhaps several deaths becoming winnowings.' Implicit in Price's poem is a critique of the abstract nature of Liadain's art. The question of whether her experiment is worth the price of life and love is not answered. The poem is informed by an Irish context of sexual repression: it was Liadain's religious vocation in the traditional rendering of the tale that demanded the rejection of sexuality by the lovers.

Another context also informs it, however, one which recurs in all of these images of the woman artist, that of the relationship between sexuality and creativity. Interestingly, the vastly different Shane and Price concur in their poetry that fidelity to art precludes love. In *Max*, Katherine Cecil Thurston's 1910 novel about a woman living as a man in order to train as an artist, Max/Maxine paints a portrait of her female self in order to control and dismiss it. The picture succeeds, but the manoeuvre doesn't. *Max* ends uneasily with Maxine seeking to do what Max has pronounced impossible, combining a life of art with a heterosexual relationship. Rosamond Jacob's *The Troubled House* insists, by contrast, on a positive connection between sexual and aesthetic freedom. The centrality and seriousness with which all of these texts treat this issue in itself renders them marginal to traditions defined by the cooption of the feminine to the materiality from which art is made, in other words, the aesthetics of both mainstream revivalism and avant-garde modernism.<sup>5</sup> It is unsurprising, then, that they are beyond the canon of Irish literature. The question to which Price's work returns us is whether the texts have the retrospective power to interrupt the legacy of that dominant aesthetic structure. Making aesthetic judgements outside the frameworks of canon and consensus is a risky business. The danger with Price was that of reversion to a Romantic ideology of the poet by way of the cult of the exceptional, unknown woman. Such a construction would simply bury her under her own monument, however. Her shorter poems indicate an engagement with the specifics of her society in its time which forces the reader of 'Cuirithir and Liadain – II' back to the relationship between its

aesthetics and politics. In poems from a 'Scrapbook for County Down', published in *Poetry Ireland* (9 April 1950),<sup>6</sup> Price includes 'The Special Constables'. The role and significance of this force is not commented on directly in the poem, which instead builds up a sense of menace: 'The three walk heavily together, fear on their shoulders, / Bruising the midnight with authority's boots; / Snouts of their rifles root among the roofs.' The relationship between Irish history and Price's work is usually more oblique, but it is nonetheless powerful. Given the context of sexual repression in Ireland and the role of the church in the original story, the poem is surprisingly absent of any declarations of religiosity on Liadain's part. Renunciation of sexuality is an experiment in renouncing life and the poem is highly ambivalent about the value of the choice. Again, attention to the context of publication is worth bearing in mind. Price's complete poem was never published and, presumably, the choice of this extract was an editorial one for *Poetry Ireland*. The 'Perpetual Dialogue of Cuirithir and Liadain' (from work in progress), which Price later described as the bulk of her long poem on the subject, was published in *The Dublin Magazine* in 1957. The implication is that the complete poem is a balanced and open-ended dialogue, though the extract in *Poetry Ireland* is exclusively from Liadain's perspective. It is consequently easily read as a woman's lament for lost love, if that is what you are looking for in a modern rendering of an Irish myth. From a contemporary perspective it is equally misleadingly easy to read it as a poet's subjective view of the exactions of her art or a woman's lament that she cannot combine independence and love. Yet the poem does not leave Liadain's point of view unchallenged. Even within the extract, there are references to Curithir's counterview of life and art. What '[if] I have created a negation . . . as he said; / A kingdom where there is nothing . . . as he said', ponders Liadain:

Curithir said I was an enemy of living,  
 Drawing mesmeric circles to diminish  
 Man's dimension; he found the silence minatory,  
 Stillness an atrophy; he craves the temporal life,  
 Seasonal, repetitive; he needs the diversion of folly,  
 The sight of a fool or a cripple to increase him.  
 He greets the world as a lover, inhaling its breath  
 Inexhaustibly, seeking not mastery, but excess.  
 For him the heart was an impediment to adventure.

\* \* \* \* \*

The different roles of the poet embraced by Curithir and Liadain as Price formulates them do not easily fit into conventional gender roles. He seeks excess, she mastery:

. . . for me  
 It was never a question of happiness; not at all;  
 It was a question, it is always a question of living,

Of finding a way, a changing equilibrium  
 Maintained above the mustering of ancient impulses  
 Intricate before word was; perception running ahead,  
 Away from darkness, away from the primordial dream  
 That winds a wild horn for an outrageous hosting;  
 The will subduing the animal incitements  
 And the masked irregulars of the mind's mutiny;  
 No inertia, no cramp of a mesmeric circle  
 But the balance of outstretched wings, force meeting force,  
 All the skills of the indivisible self  
 Creating in counterpoint a calculated entity,  
 Vision and understanding driving spirit  
 To generate a form imbued with the art of living.  
 Using my life, I have made an experiment in living.  
 Perhaps it has failed; for I am repudiated;  
 Or is proved; and the corollary is solitude.

Liadain's uncertainty about the success of her experiment is indicative of an ambiguity running through the poem. That ambiguity makes it impossible to construct ultimately any one poetic voice. Curithir and Liadain represent two positions in relation to life and art and Price's poem does not propose any identification between the poet and either one or the other of them. Moreover the poem cannot be assimilated to any preconceived notion about the gendering of poetic power. Liadain is an artist more than confident of her powers. In contrast to the artist in Dorothy Macardle's 'The Portrait of Roisin Dhu', who is fatally oblivious to the power of his art to affect its living object, for example, Liadain has a belief in representation's ability to mould reality which speaks to the concerns of feminist criticism in an unexpected way:

We go round and round, he said, but I shall go backward,  
 Listening along the blurring trail of sound,  
 Word by remembered word, phrase by slurred phrase,  
 Halted by lacunae and half-willed obliterations,  
 One more dishonest historian with a special plea,  
 Composing and redisposing the unacceptable,  
 Subtly changing him to what I would have him be,  
 Re-creating him, drowning him in legend . . .  
 No, no, not that . . . I must not even name him;  
 If I uttered his name it would put a leash upon him.  
 Naming has power; half-way across the world  
 He would be halted by my invocation,  
 My thought would reach him and re-make his mood.  
 That is a tyranny I must not practise.

Price's poem critiques the tyranny poetry and legend exert over the reality of the past, in a way that foreshadows Eavan Boland, for example, in *A Kind*

of *Scar* (1989) and *Object Lessons* (1995). It also imagines that power to be at the disposal of the woman poet. 'The unworked nowhere' (McGuckian, 'Timed Chess', *Captain Lavender*, p. 75) of forgotten poetry is a stranger and more interesting place than anyone could have anticipated.

## Conclusion

Differences can coexist, cross-fertilize and challenge, be acknowledged, confronted, celebrated and not remain destructive of the other in an expanded but shared cultural space. Instead of the present exclusivity of the cultural canon contested by fragmented special studies all premised on the binary oppositions of identity politics, insiders/outside, margins/centres, high/low, and so forth, the cultural field may be reimagined as a space for multiple occupancy where differencing creates a productive covenant opposing the phallic logic that offers us only the prospect of safety in sameness or danger in difference, of assimilation to or exclusion from the canonized norm (Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, p. 11).

Pollock's notion of an expanded, shared, differenced cultural space can seem utopian at times. Yet it is difficult to imagine any other kind of cultural space that would create a context in which poets like Shane and Price could be reread in a way which does full justice to their difference and their complexity. The project of recovery of lesser-known and unknown women's writing has the potential to remap the canonical territory of Irish writing, rereading from the margins to reconfigure the cultural space usually designated 'Irish'.

### *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Vols. IV & V: critical contexts*

Given the time span of the contents of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, it seems a little premature to assess its impact only five years after the publication of the concluding volumes. The immediate hostile reaction in the Irish newspapers mirrored the earlier hostile reaction to the first three volumes, with the interesting side effect of retrospectively canonizing – in all senses – the earlier set. This was particularly noticeable in the extensive *Irish Times* review. This reaction was predictable, particularly in its emphasis on what was not in the anthology as opposed to what was in it. This might be described as the *Harry Potter* effect in newspaper reviewing: where the text is too long to read or assimilate in the appropriate time frame for newspaper coverage, the reviewer must perforce find an angle from which to generate a thousand words or so without having to engage too closely with the actual book or books under review. In the case of Volumes I to III, this meant that newspapers normally hostile to feminist criticism initially ran the story of the exclusion of women writers. In the case of Volumes IV and V, the familiar construction of a feminist enterprise as necessarily blinkered or exclusive

required the rehabilitation of Volumes I to III as exemplars of scholarly impartiality. Changes in the political climate, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland, also meant that the political imperative of hostility to *Field Day* had been removed.

The politics of Volumes IV and V were a somewhat different matter. Even newspaper reviewers with no understanding of their relation to the underlying concepts of feminist scholarship or radical challenges to the notion of literary canons understood that their integration of historical documents and oral and written literature was a challenge to mainstream notions of the status and function of literature. The initial newspaper reaction to that challenge was not positive, but engagement with it has been a feature of the complexity and range of journal reviews. Beginning with Lucy McDiarmid's *Times Literary Supplement* review, reviews in the *Irish University Review*, *Irish Literary Supplement*, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* and the *Dublin Review* have begun to unravel what the significance of such a project might be for understandings of Irish culture and history and to propose how it might be used by scholars, students and readers. Margaret Kelleher's discussion of *Field Day* in her 2003 account of the long history of feminist criticism in Ireland and Roisin Higgins's review of Volume V in the *Irish University Review* (2004) have also sought to understand the volumes' relation to their own historical moment.

As an editor, I found both startling and illuminating Higgins's argument that the death of Anne Lovett, commemorated at the time of her review, haunted our endeavours. Perhaps the scale and extent of the undertaking is only explicable as a response to the scale and extent of feminists' alienation from the Ireland they grew up in as a place of secrets and constraints and half-known things, and the Ireland where as adults they lost political battles to forces which seemed to draw on inherited fears and anxieties, originating in that apparently un-narrated place, women's past. Repeatedly we talked of a springboard for future research. Claire Bracken's analysis of the 'rhizomatic' structure of the volumes and their consequent affinity with the internet projects in which a number of the volumes' editors are involved would seem to indicate the springboard worked. The way in which a younger generation of scholars are using the volumes, theorizing and historicizing, criticizing their limitations and exceeding them, is exhilarating.

If the past and present of Irish women was the object of our research, it was assumed that that object could only be provisionally represented, for now, until more is known. In retrospect, amid all the diversity of epistemologies, methodologies, disciplines and training, that was the one constant. The multiplicity of sources and voices and texts and editors can be understood in this context as the mark of a narrative in process, the refusal to construct one story which will make sense – finally – of woman's relation to Irishness and the alternative proposal of a point of dialogue with the past for future use.

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